

EXHIBIT 4DATE 3/27/07SB 404

## Would you take this job?

By Tracy Warner, Editorial Page Editor  
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Your job is to lead a small group of inexperienced yellow-Nomex-clad college students into a burning forest, armed with shovels and pickaxes, there to "fight" the fire. Your paramount duty is the safety of your crew. The rules command it: Do not lead them into danger. Do not expose them to unnecessary risk. Plan your escape.

But, you also must try to stop the fire. Everything that moves the flames — the terrain, fuel, heat, humidity, wind — is beyond control and only vaguely predictable, and then only some of the time. The smoke is blinding, the noise deafening. It is warlike, disorienting, chaos. You must, by the very nature of your job, work in the vicinity of flames that can suddenly move toward you faster than you can run away. In seconds escape routes disappear. Sound decisions turn faulty. Safety becomes danger.

And, if something goes dreadfully wrong, as you well know it can, you may look forward to being questioned by two or three different federal agencies, named a defendant in multiple lawsuits, subjected to various forms of professional discipline, and — maybe five years hence — face a multiple-count federal indictment, conviction and imprisonment for most of your remaining natural life.

This is not reasonable "accountability." It is not public service. It is all risk, all blame, and little reward other than being sent to take the same risk time after time, year after year, until you can escape with early retirement. It is insanity.

Insane, but from the perspective of a forest firefighter, it describes the recent nature of the profession. The trend started after the tragedy of the Thirtymile fire near Winthrop in 2001, when four firefighters died. That was followed by substantial political blame-finding, lawsuits and the eventual indictment of the crew chief, Ellreese Daniels, facing trial on manslaughter charges in federal court in Spokane.

Experienced firefighters, knowing theirs is dangerous work, wonder whether it is worth the risk — not of dying in flames, but taking the blame. An unscientific poll taken by the International Association of Wildland Fire recently showed many firefighters ready to turn away. A third said they would fight fewer fires, 23 percent said they would not serve in a supervisory role, 8 percent planned to quit. The poll was followed by pages of anonymous comments, not all supportive of Daniels but many fearing a similar fate. ("Never will I put my family in financial danger or threaten that." "I cannot risk the future well-being of myself and family. It just isn't worth it. Sorry.")

Elsewhere, top Forest Service supervisors send mass e-mails to firefighters to counter growing unrest and fears the agency will abandon them to the legal system. In Southern California, the head of a firefighters' union is advising members not to cooperate with one federal investigation into the death of five Forest Service firefighters in the Esperanza blaze last summer, because of the possibility of self-incrimination. In New Mexico, a bill protecting firefighters from criminal prosecution has been introduced.

This follows a summer fire season where observers noted a new caution and reluctance among firefighters. Decisions, read one poll comment, are made not on the fire conditions but on potential legal liability.

We surely will have many more fires, and because of the zeal to place blame, have fewer experienced people to fight them. It will be the result this policy of "accountability" deserves.

Tracy Warner's column appears Tuesday through Friday. He can be reached at [warner@wenworld.com](mailto:warner@wenworld.com) or 665-1163.